

FCC Consumer Advisory

Telephone Service Help for Victims of Hurricane Katrina

The FCC understands that victims of natural or man-made disasters need access to telephone service, particularly in emergency situations. Toward this goal, the FCC is providing an estimated \$211 million in Universal Service Fund (USF or Fund) support to Hurricane Katrina victims, to help ensure they continue to have access to telecommunications services necessary to recover from this national tragedy.

The USF was created by Congress and the FCC to promote the availability of quality telephone service at affordable rates, and increase access of advanced telecommunications services nationwide to all customers. The Fund provides support to four programs – Low-Income, High-Cost, Schools and Libraries, and Rural Health Care. All telecommunications companies that provide service between states contribute to the Universal Service Fund.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What Telephone Service Help is the FCC Providing for Hurricane Katrina Victims?

The FCC will reimburse participating wireless companies that offer at least 300 free minutes and a handset to qualified victims of Hurricane Katrina. Qualified victims may sign up for the free phone and minutes package any time until June 1, 2006. Wireless companies may offer more generous packages if they want to. Check with the wireless companies serving your area to see if they are participating in the FCC program and to find out exactly what they're offering.

The FCC will also reimburse participating telephone companies (both wireless and wireline) that assist qualified Katrina victims to reconnect their telephone service. Qualified victims may sign up for this support up until March 1, 2007. Qualified victims are limited to one connection for temporary housing and one reconnection when qualified Katrina victims return to their permanent residences.

Both offers are limited to **one per household**, which the FCC defines as an adult and his or her dependents living in one place. For example, if you obtain a handset and 300 free minutes from one company, you can't get another handset and 300 more minutes from a second company. Unless your wireless company decides to offer more than 300 minutes, it can charge you for additional minutes, but it may not require you to sign a long-term contract to receive any package it decides to offer.

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Note: The FCC does NOT provide rebates or vouchers directly to consumers. The FCC only reimburses companies that choose to participate and sign up qualified customers. Many companies have told the FCC they are offering packages or plan to offer them soon, but they aren't obligated to do so. Also, some wireless companies need to get the FCC's approval to offer packages, but the FCC is prepared to handle requests for approval quickly.

2. Who is eligible for this Help?

To be eligible, you must be:

- a victim of Hurricane Katrina, and
- from a county or parish designated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) as eligible for support under FEMA's Individuals and Households program (see the list at the end), and
- determined by FEMA to be eligible for assistance under FEMA's Individuals and Households program, and
- have no obligation to repay FEMA for support received under FEMA's Individuals and Households program.

3. How Do I Get This Help?

If you have not already done so, you should call the FEMA toll-free registration number at 1-800-621-FEMA (3362) or register on line at www.fema.gov. If FEMA determines that you are eligible under the Individuals and Households program, it will send you a letter detailing the specific amount and intended purpose of the grant. Carriers participating in the FCC program will request this letter for verification.

4. If I already have a handset, or bought a new wireless service plan or reconnected my wireline phone, can I get a refund?

If you already have a handset from a participating carrier, your carrier may offer a special package with more than 300 minutes. Even if you already have wireless service, you may still be able to obtain a package if you can demonstrate that you meet FEMA's eligibility criteria. If your wireless or regular, wireline company is participating in the program, it can tell you what it is offering to supplement what you already have. The FCC does not provide refunds.

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5. Can I Get Any Other Help?

Yes. First, many wireless companies are offering additional help to Katrina victims, whether or not the victims qualify for FEMA Individual Housing Assistance. Customers should contact their wireless companies to find out what additional relief may be available. Possible relief measures include:

- Agreeing not to disconnect services to customers from affected areas for non-payment of bills;
- Developing customer-friendly billing practices for affected customers;
- Free long distance, roaming, and text messaging in affected areas;
- Free wireless broadband to relief agencies to help reunite displaced families;
- Free phone calls and phone charging services to those affected by the storm at open retail store locations in the hardest hit areas, including Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and Gulfport, Mississippi;
- Free Wi-Fi service at HotSpot locations in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana;
- Installation of emergency communications centers throughout the region, where customers can send text messages and make long-distance calls free of charge;
- Cell phone distribution and provision of long-distance calling cards to those displaced by the storm; and
- Enabling customers to donate to the American Red Cross directly from their wireless phones by text messaging the word "HELP" to the short code 2HELP (24357).

Second, customers NOT eligible for the FCC's special Katrina relief may still qualify for help under the FCC's regular Lifeline program, which provides discounts on wireless and wireline phone service on the basis of need. Discounts are NOT provided directly to customers, but through reimbursements to companies providing the service. Eligibility requirements are set by the states. For more information contact your state commission or check http://www.universalservice.org/li/consumers/lifeline_support.asp.

Last, the FCC is offering additional support to qualified health care providers serving Katrina victims and schools and libraries affected by Hurricane Katrina.

6. What Should I Do Now?

Call the companies providing service in your area to find out whether they are or will be participating in these FCC programs. Have your FEMA letter ready when you call. Contact FEMA if you need a copy of the letter or other confirmation of your eligibility.

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You can also visit <http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/katrina/cellprogram.html>, or call the FCC's Consumer Center at 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322) voice; 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322) TTY, for information on companies currently participating in these FCC programs.

For more information regarding Hurricane Katrina visit <http://www.fcc.gov/cgb/katrina>. For further information on the FCC's Universal Service Program, visit www.fcc.gov/wcb/universal_service/.

COUNTIES AND PARISHES DESIGNATED BY FEMA AS ELIGIBLE FOR SUPPORT UNDER THE INDIVIDUALS AND HOUSEHOLDS PROGRAM

Note: FEMA updates this list continually. For the most recent list, go to:
<http://www.gismaps.fema.gov/2005pages/katrina.shtm>.

Alabama: Baldwin, Marengo, Mobile, Pickens, Greene, Hale, Tuscaloosa, and Washington.

Louisiana: Acadia, Ascension, Assumption, Calcasieu, Cameron, East Baton Rouge, East Feliciana, Iberia, Iberville, Jefferson, Jefferson Davis, Lafayette, Lafourche, Livingston, Orleans, Pointe Coupee, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Charles, St. Helena, St. James, St. John, St. Mary, St. Martin, St. Tammany, Tangipahoa, Terrebonne, Vermilion, Washington, West Baton Rouge, and West Feliciana.

Mississippi: Adams, Amite, Attala, Bolivar, Claiborne, Choctaw, Clarke, Copiah, Covington, Forrest, Franklin, George, Greene, Hancock, Harrison, Hinds, Holmes, Humphreys, Jackson, Jasper, Jefferson, Jefferson Davis, Jones, Kemper, Lafayette, Lamar, Lauderdale, Lawrence, Leake, Lincoln, Lowndes, Madison, Marion, Neshoba, Newton, Noxubee, Oktibbeha, Pearl River, Perry, Pike, Quitman, Rankin, Scott, Simpson, Smith, Stone, Walthall, Warren, Wayne, Wilkinson, Winston, and Yazoo.

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